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ABSTRACT

This small-grant funded project was intended to act as a pilot study looking at the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in adult education. In particular, the project aimed to investigate the use of ICT in extending patterns of participation in adult education to those social groups presently excluded from learning; one of the oft-stated rationales for the funding of such programs in the United Kingdom and United States. Over the course of the year, the project followed the development of the Digital College ICT-based program in Wales, alongside the concurrent implementation of the UK-wide national government initiatives the "University for Industry" and "learndirect." In doing so, a range of research instruments were developed, used and refined, primary and secondary data were collected and analyzed, and directions for future research formulated. The scope of the data collected allowed a series of tentative conclusions to be reached regarding the effectiveness of ICT-based education to achieve its aims. The overall preliminary finding from the project is the wide disparity between the enthusiastic rhetoric surrounding ICT-based education and the reality 'on-the-ground,' as it presently stands. (Author/AEF)

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ED 447 789

FINAL REPORT

Investigating the Role of Technology in Widening Participation in Lifelong Learning

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SUMMARY OF PROJECT

This small-grant funded project was intended to act as a pilot study looking at the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in adult education. In particular, the project aimed to investigate the use of ICT in extending patterns of participation in adult education to those social groups presently excluded from learning; one of the oft-stated rationales for the funding of such programs in the UK and USA. Over the course of the year the project followed the development of the 'Digital College' ICT-based program in Wales, alongside the concurrent implementation of the UK-wide national government initiatives the '*University for Industry*' and '*learndirect*'. In doing so, a range of research instruments were developed, used and refined, primary and secondary data were collected and analyzed, and directions for future research formulated. Moreover, the scope of the data collected allowed a series of tentative conclusions to be reached regarding the effectiveness of ICT-based education to achieve its aims. These findings have already been widely disseminated via a series of academic journal articles and conference presentations as well as forming the basis for a forthcoming book currently being written by the grant-holders.

PROJECT RATIONALE

'Virtual education' programs, using digital television broadcasts coupled with Internet-based resources, are seen by many politicians and educationalists as an answer to the problem of providing learning opportunities for all citizens by overcoming the existing barriers to

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participation in formal learning such as cost, travel and mistrust of institutions. In this way, ICT-based educational provision could play a key role in combating social exclusion by preventing disaffection from the process of education. This project examined how one such program is being set up and 'marketed', and calculated the effectiveness of this and other ICT-based educational programs in attracting participants who were previously cut off from opportunities for lifelong learning. Independent research was seen to be clearly necessary, since the programs are primarily 'political' creations, run and assessed by enthusiasts of technological solutions to social exclusion. If greater social justice is to be achieved via the virtual education movement, early feedback on its effectiveness is essential.

The primary objective of the virtual education movement, that of widening participation to learning opportunities, is testable. This project set out to consider how far that objective is capable of being achieved, and if difficulties were encountered, to suggest remedies for them. The key research questions were therefore as follows:

- What strategies are the virtual education providers using to attract learners?
- How effective are these strategies in attracting potential users?
- What is the evidence that such opportunities have widened access to include those previously disenfranchised from lifetime learning?
- What are the reactions and experiences of users to the quality of the learning experience provided?
- (If there are problems in widening access) what suggestions can be made to help the virtual education movement achieve their objective?

APPOINTMENT OF RESEARCHER

We appointed Ms. Sara Williams, a doctoral student from the School of Social Sciences, as our part-time (0.5) researcher. This appointment has been a success. Ms. Williams has both developed her research skills and her publication portfolio (see below). Through her efforts we have been able to make contact with a wider range of policy-makers and practitioners in this area and to conduct a larger number of interviews than we originally intended (see below). The bulk of the grant has been spent on her salary (and the remainder on local travel for fieldwork, and supplies for the project office, as planned).

REPORT OF FIELDWORK & METHODOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

By the start of the fieldwork period all of the relevant projects and programs we had previously established links with had moved their start dates to a later point. This was due, in part, to technical difficulties and perhaps to over-optimistic estimates when they had applied for their financing. The Digital College (CD), for example, intended to be up-and-running at the start of our investigation (September 1999). At present, after two further delays, it is now intended to be fully operational by November 2000. Similar delays and difficulties have also attended the University for Industry (UfI) and the associated 'learndirect' telephone brokering service. The implications of such delays for our investigation have been considerable. We have only recently been able to obtain details of participants in the Wales Digital College's small-scale pilot scheme. Therefore, throughout

the last year we have had to look further afield for available datasets with which to trial our methods.

Since initiatives like the Digital College and Ufl are still not fully operational, in the first instance we contacted the policy-makers, managers and initiators of these schemes rather than their users. In total we have conducted seven taped interviews with key actors involved in the establishment and implementation of ICT-based education programs in Wales (including key policy-makers, politicians, and representatives from the education and employment sectors).

We then cooperated with the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) in their 1999 adult learners survey and as a result obtained data from a sample of 500 residents in Wales. NIACE asked us to analyze these and compare the results with those in England and further afield. The survey gathered data on background characteristics, access to ICT and recent experiences of adult learning. Towards the latter half of the project, the Digital College ran a small pilot scheme for learners of the Welsh language, and we have been able to analyze the characteristics of these participants from their registration details and by conducting an email survey. We also collected details of their web-based learning activity, and were able analyze changes in these patterns over time. In addition, as part of this pilot study, we have developed a Geographical Information Systems (GIS) based method for comparing the characteristics of participants with local measures of deprivation even where we obtain only the post-code (zip-code) of the individuals involved.

Over the summer of 2000, we have finally been able to conduct interviews with the first-wave of learners beginning to use the pilot learndirect and Digital College pilot projects. In order to 'boost' our interview sample of active ICT-based learners we also contacted 'learners' via other ICT-based educational initiatives that are already operational in Wales, such as the Cardiff ITEC and Rhondda 'Arts Factory' programs. This range of ICT-based education sources has allowed us to conduct 31 taped interviews with participants in these schemes. All interviews have been carried out 'face-to-face' aside from interviews with 'distant' learners on the Digital College pilot scheme where we have piloted e-mail and telephone-based interview techniques with learners from England and the USA. Since the number of interviews with learners had already exceeded the number we originally budgeted for (12), and with so few participants in the schemes that there is no reliable way of identifying genuinely excluded cases, we did not complete interviews with those who had not taken part.

KEY FINDINGS

The overall preliminary finding from the project is **the wide disparity between the enthusiastic rhetoric surrounding ICT-based education and the reality 'on-the-ground', as it presently stands**. Despite the considerable sums of money being spent on programs such as the Digital College and learndirect, these show little sign of tangible impact during the duration of the research project. The continued postponement of the rollout of the Digital College program has exacerbated this problem.

Moreover, over the course of the year it has become apparent that **such programs still face significant barriers to realizing their goal of ICT-based education for all**. For example, the Digital College's aim of using digital television and the Internet to reach excluded learners is complicated by the large areas of the valleys of South Wales which are not part of the ISDN cable network and appear incapable of receiving digital TV transmissions (for a variety of terrain-related reasons). Similarly, in terms of the widely held concerns over an emerging 'digital divide' our analysis of the NIACE adult learning survey data suggested that relying on home-based ICT would do little to reach already excluded groups of learners given the bias in computer and Internet ownership towards white, middle-class, male learners.

Even at this early stage, interviews with key actors and visits to educational providers reveal **an emerging 'clash' between new forms of ICT-based education provision and existing structures of lifelong learning**. There appeared to be considerable resentment among those already involved in adult learning (i.e. further and higher educational institutions and other forms of adult education) towards the nation-wide *University for Industry* and *learndirect* programs, which were seen as a 'threat' to established local forms of adult education provision rather than complementary partners. Such concerns appeared to be centered around issues of ICT-based education 'creaming off' learners who would otherwise carry on with 'traditional' adult education, and the subsequent loss of revenue for existing providers. This hostility, even at this early stage, could prove detrimental to the eventual success of ICT-based education-programs.

The project's intention was to provide an indication of the preliminary success, or otherwise, of attempts to widen access to learning opportunities via virtual colleges in the UK. Given the embryonic nature of all the programs covered in the project it would be unwise to draw any definitive conclusions at this early stage. Nevertheless, **our research found no evidence to suggest that ICT-based programs were attracting clientele above and beyond those individuals who would otherwise engaged in learning**. In terms of the small numbers of learners enrolled on the first Digital College online learning course (Welsh language for beginners), *all* displayed indications of already being engaged in lifelong learning. All were already qualified to National Vocational Qualification Level 3 (equivalent to university entry level). Nearly all were in professional or managerial occupations, especially in education and the media. Similarly, many of the learners interviewed at drop-in centers and other programs were already engaged in a previously established cycle of education & training. Moreover, our interviews with key actors and work with the providers themselves, suggested that little consideration is being given as to how to attract non-traditional learners and *widen* rather than increase or diversify levels of access to learning.

Finally, **the content of much of this ICT-based educational provision was found to be limited**. Many of the virtual college drop-in centers for learners were concentrated on low-level ICT skills (in particular Internet searching) and the online language learning course was limited to the repackaging of four modules of previously available as orthodox distance learning materials. Similarly, there was very little evidence of any 'innovative' use of the technology to enhance the learning experience, such as 'interactive' learning via the Internet. However, these findings should again be seen in light of the limited 'roll-out' of the ICT-education programs.

Our early findings suggest that:

- Greater effort must be made by each initiative to connect with existing non-participants, else all these worthy projects are in danger of failing in their own terms;
- The use of ICT alone cannot overcome multiple disadvantages, nor provide a motivation for all to return to learn;
- All initiatives should work together, or at least not in competition, and with more sensitivity to the needs of existing voluntary groups and service providers.

FURTHER WORK

Having made appropriate contacts with policy-makers and practitioners in several related settings for adult participation in virtual learning experiences, and now that these initiatives are up and running, and we have developed methods for further work, we are in excellent position to follow up this pilot study. We need a much a larger body of data relating to participants in such schemes, even if only at the zip-code (area of residence) level. Only then can we answer the questions about widening participation, and more clearly identify those adults still excluded (for further investigation). As a result of this pilot work we have been formally asked by the management of the Digital College to submit a tender to evaluate their work once the college has gone 'live'. At present we are the only group invited to tender.

PROJECT DISSEMINATION

The background and early findings from this pilot project have met with widespread interest in the academic and practitioner communities. We have so far published six journal articles using our material, and have written three more which are in the refereeing process. It is intended that at least another two articles will be written over the next six months based on the data collected from the key actors and learner interviews.

Published Articles in Academic Journals

- Selwyn, N., Gorard, S. and Williams, S. (2001) The role of the 'technical fix' in UK lifelong education policy, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 20, 4, (forthcoming)
- Gorard, S. (2000) Adult participation in learning and the economic imperative, *Studies in the Education of Adults* (forthcoming)
- Gorard, S., Selwyn, N. and Williams, S. (2000) Could try harder!: Problems facing technological solutions to non-participation in adult learning, *British Educational Research Journal* , 26, 4, 507-521
- Gorard, S. and Selwyn, N. (1999) Switching on the Learning Society? Questioning the role of technology in widening participation in lifelong learning, *Journal of Education Policy*, 14, 5, 523-534
- Selwyn, N. and Gorard, S. (1999) The role of technology in establishing a learning society, *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 30, 4, 374-376

Articles Submitted to Academic Journals

- Selwyn, N., Gorard, S. and Williams, S. (2001) Digital divide or digital opportunity? The role of technology in overcoming social exclusion in US education, *Educational Policy* (submitted)
- Selwyn, N., Williams, S. and Gorard, S. (2001) E-Stablishing a Learning Society: the Use of the Internet to Attract Adults to Lifelong Learning in Wales, *Innovations in Education & Training International* (submitted)

- Gorard, S. (2001) Robbing Peter to pay Paul: resolving the contradiction of lifelong learning, *Educational Studies* (submitted)

Published Articles in Practitioner Publications

- Selwyn, N. and Gorard, S. (1999) Can technology really widen participation in lifelong learning?, *Adults Learning*, 10, 6, 27-29

We have also presented our research at six major conferences in the UK and USA, and four of the papers so presented have subsequently been published as conference proceedings.

- Gorard, S. (2000) *Robbing Peter to pay Paul: resolving the contradiction of lifelong learning*, Global Internet Colloquium on Lifelong Learning, Open University
- Gorard, S. (2000) Robbing Peter to pay Paul: resolving the contradiction of lifelong learning, in Edwards, R., Clarke, J. and Millar, N. (Eds.) *Supporting lifelong learning: Working Papers*, ISBN 0749236191
- Gorard, S. and Selwyn, N. (1999) *Researching the role of digital technology in widening participation in lifelong learning*, BERA Conference, Sussex
- Gorard, S. and Selwyn, N. (1999) *Researching the role of digital technology in widening participation in lifelong learning*, Education-line - http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/
- Gorard, S., Selwyn, N. and Williams, S. (2000) *Technology's role in widening participation in adult education - some indicators from England and Wales*, AERA Conference, New Orleans
- Selwyn, N. and Gorard, S.(1999) *Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere: Overcoming the barrier of space through the use of information and communications technology*, SCUTREA Conference, Warwick
- Selwyn, N. and Gorard, S.(1999) Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere: Overcoming the barrier of space through the use of information and communications technology, in Merrill, B. (1999) *The final frontier: exploring spaces in the education of adults*, Warwick: Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults, ISBN 1 869836 42 1, 8 pages
- Williams, S., Gorard, S. and Selwyn, N. (2000) *Inclusiveness for whom? The relevance of creating a demand for ICT -based adult learning*, presentation to SCUTREA Conference, Nottingham, 3-5th July
- Williams, S., Gorard, S. and Selwyn, N. (2000) Inclusiveness for whom? The relevance of creating a demand for ICT-based adult learning, in Jackson, A. and Jones, D. (Eds.) *Researching 'inclusion'*, Nottingham: Continuing Education Press, ISBN 1850410917, 7 pages
- Williams, S., Gorard, S. and Selwyn, N. (2000) *Recognizing informal learning at a (key) stroke: social inclusion via telematics*, presentation to BERA Conference, Cardiff, 7-9th September

We have a contract with the University of Wales Press to publish a paperback book of the project findings due to appear in late 2001:

- Selwyn, N., Gorard, S. and Williams, S. (2001) *Wales in an information age*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press

Moreover, the early findings from the project are also reported as part of two other books:

- Gorard, S. (2000) *Education and Social Justice*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, ISBN 0708316190, 242 pages
- Gorard, S., Rees, G., Fevre, R. and Furlong, J. (2001) *Creating a learning society*, Bristol: Policy Press

This dissemination has so far led to significant interest, and the AERA presentation in particular led to requests for further information from researchers and policy-makers in

several countries. We have recently been invited to write a summary piece on the project for the Times Educational Supplement, a national newspaper.